

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This book is about the human history of the Great Plains, the immense grassland at the heart of North America, beginning with its initial settlement by human beings toward the end of the Ice Age and continuing into the early 20th century. The Great Plains include a million or more square kilometers from the Canadian parkland in the north to Central Texas in the south and from the Rocky Mountains in the west to roughly the 94th meridian in the east (Figure 1.1). We know the deep human history of this region primarily through archaeological evidence and indigenous traditional histories, although this evidence is not widely known outside the Plains. This part of the world is a neglected and often maligned region, perhaps as much among professional archaeologists as among the urban elites of New York and Los Angeles.

This is as true of the place itself as it is of its deep history. In the early 19th century, Stephen Long led an expedition across the Plains for the American army and proclaimed the region “the Great American Desert.” With Long’s perspective in mind, Americans of that time widely viewed it as utterly uninhabitable save by native hunters, little more than a barrier to westward expansion (Dillon 1967). However, Long traveled across the Plains at the end of a serious drought (Cook et al. 2007); the conditions he encountered were real, but taking them as an accurate view of the region as a whole means ignoring their place in the context of the long-term history of climate in the region. In the same way, widespread views of the native people of the Plains focus on the period of intense interaction between Euroamericans and Plains Indians in the eighteenth and, particularly, nineteenth centuries, an interval that was dramatically different from the millennia of history leading up to that time.

The image of mounted bison hunters on the Western Plains dressed in fringed and beaded buckskin clothing and eagle-feather headdresses, living in tipis, and battling blue-coated soldiers at the Little Big Horn and elsewhere (reinforced in 1990s Academy Award-winning *Dances with Wolves*) is one of the historical icons

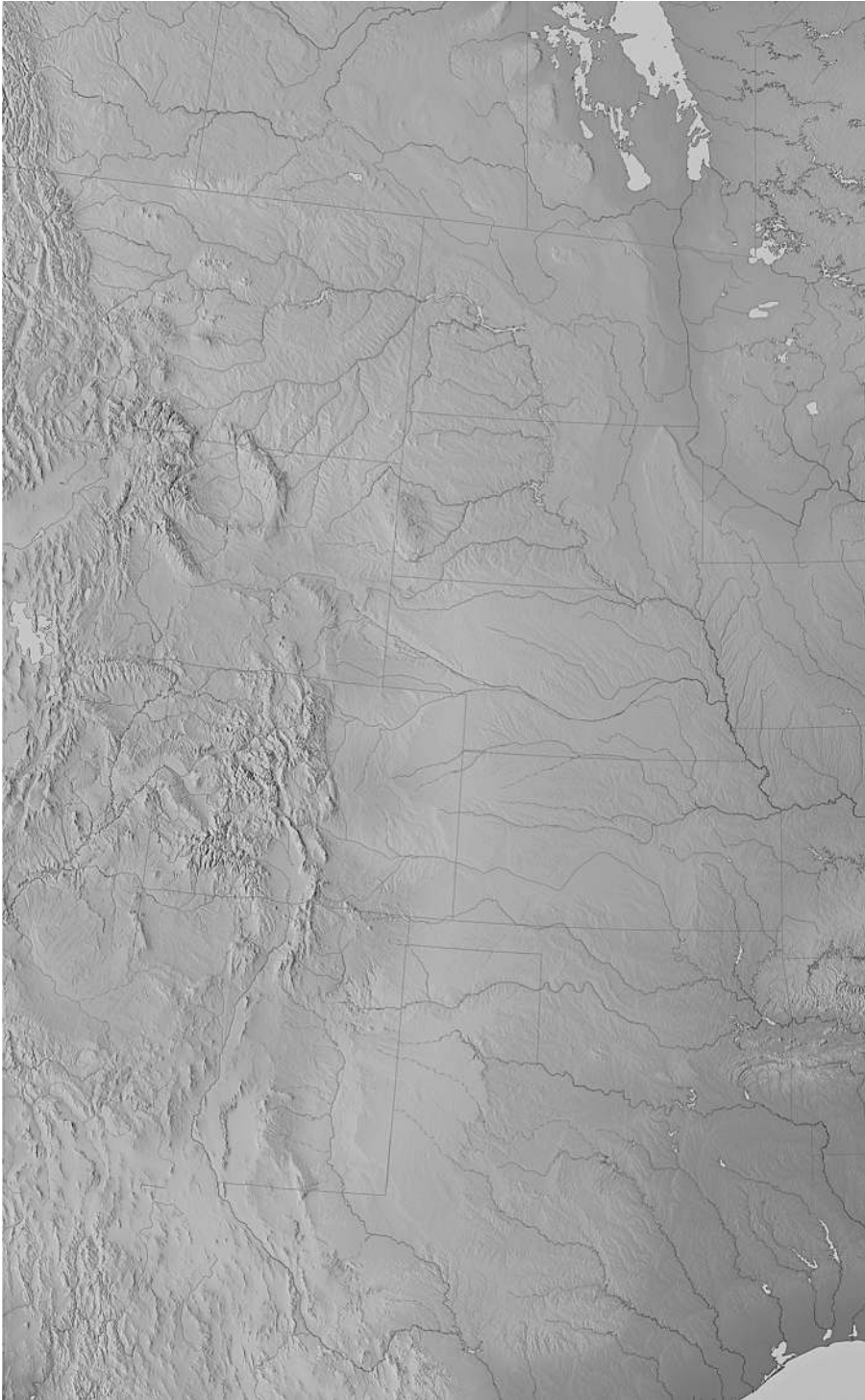


Figure 1.1 The Great Plains.

of North America. Indeed, the bison-focused hunter-gatherer groups on the Western Plains during this period underlie not only most views of Indian people on the Plains but also the widespread views of North American Indians in general (Ewers [1964] discusses how this may have come to be). But the prominence in the American imagination of the image of the nineteenth-century Plains hunting tribes obscures and misrepresents the rich and diverse history of the native people of the Great Plains as profoundly as Long's view misrepresented its climate history. A century of archaeological research in the region tells a far more complex story of past lives there than the one that dominates the popular views. Not all hunters and gatherers on the Plains focused intensively on bison and the majority of the people who lived on the Plains at European contact and who had lived there for centuries were farmers..

Furthermore, focusing on the social groups on the Plains during the 1800s – the nomadic Lakota or the Cheyenne in the west, or the settled Pawnee in the east – belies the reality of immense change in the region. Many of the nomadic groups – the Cheyenne and Lakota among them – arrived on the Plains very recently, moving west in front of the advancing American frontier. The social formations of the groups with more ancient residence on the Plains – such as the Pawnee (portrayed along with American soldiers as villains in *Dances With Wolves*) – also appear to have changed dramatically shortly before Europeans first arrived in the New World. And the focus on war between Indians and settlers obscures tremendous variation in evidence for conflict in time and space, even in the 19th century, as well as similar variation in relations between indigenous groups and in-migrating Europeans and Americans. The deep human history of the Great Plains is a story of immense change over millennia in every aspect of indigenous lives there. We know this long history incompletely, but it is unambiguously rich and complex. My goal here is to summarize what we know about the ways in which it led up to the brief interval that so dominates the way we think about that region.

As is true for much of North America, the earliest occupations of the Plains are simultaneously the ones that attract the greatest attention and that we know the least about. Research on early occupations on the Plains dominates widespread views of the earliest people on this continent far more than research elsewhere. In addition, past work on the Plains has particularly driven the misguided fantasy that early people (Paleoindians, and especially Clovis people) were highly mobile specialized big-game hunters. Even on the Plains, though, we know enough – and the available data are richly enough detailed – to move well beyond that sadly worn stereotype (Chapters 3 and 4). It is true that Plains hunters had the skills, knowledge, and courage to control and slaughter stampeding herds of bison for all of at least the last 12,000 years, but this is far from all they did.

Part of seeing this requires us to attend to the degree of change over the course of the early occupations in the region. Plains data offer us some of the

clearest evidence for long-term intensification of subsistence practices in response to demographic and environmental changes that exist in North America. These changes developed over millennia in the face of massive environmental fluctuations and led to increasing regional diversity in material, social, and spiritual practice in the region (Chapter 5). Plants played a major role in these changes, and so did daily practices as prosaic as cooking techniques. But bison played a role as well, with Northern Plains hunters increasing the sophistication of their strategies, devising corrals that could contain many tons of furious and powerful animals long enough for hunters to kill them. At the same time, they also began to drive bison over the great cliff jumps that a few European explorers saw in the Colonial period. These same northern hunters also built the earliest parts of less prosaic structures that we call “medicine wheels” – spiritual centers that people added to and rebuilt for millennia.

As these changes progressed, Plains communities increasingly reached out beyond the grasslands, playing major roles in the development of continent-wide networks of connection that moved goods and ideas over vast distances (Chapter 6). Some 2,000 years ago, bison hunters forged a pattern of surplus production that remained central to these networks into the 1800s and changed the ways in which they represented themselves and their communities in art and mortuary ritual. Other areas reached out into the Plains actively as well, and not just through exchange. Data from the Southern Plains tells us that the area along the eastern edge of the Rocky Mountains where the first Spanish explorers encountered “border pueblos” such as Pecos and Gran Quivira is actually a long way from the ancient eastern border of the American Southwest. Stone arrowheads embedded in human bone suggest that this border may often have been a dangerous place (Chapters 6, 9, and 10).

As more complex and populous societies arose around the Plains, these connections shifted. Extensive maize horticulture came to the grasslands a millennium ago, spreading north almost to Canada and hundreds of kilometers west of the 99th meridian that marked the boundary between farmers and bison hunters in the Colonial era (Chapters 7–10). The reliance on cultigens varied in space and increased over time, especially as farmers coalesced into towns with populations that sometimes numbered in the thousands and often served as central nodes in continent-wide trade networks. Social relations ranged from trade to genocidal violence, and migrations of new people into the region precipitated major social changes in the years leading up to European contact. Warfare changed social boundaries and social relations. Rock art tells some of the story of conflict; combat victims and fortifications tell other parts.

Conflict is central to the story of human history on the Plains after Europeans arrived, although it does not tell the whole story. Communities in the grasslands prospered as European goods increasingly flowed along traditional trade networks, but they collapsed as pathogens flowed with those

goods, new groups fled west into the region, and violence and economic change accelerated into the 19th century. Archaeology continues to tell human history on the Plains into the 20th century in the residues of expanding American populations, striking coal miners, and Japanese American concentration camps (Chapter 11).

WHO IS THIS BOOK ABOUT?

Archaeology is worth doing because it tells us about human history in ways that other kinds of evidence (e.g., oral and written history) cannot and about periods of human history that other kinds of evidence either do not address or address remotely and imprecisely. But archaeology is always about human beings and how we think and talk about human beings in archaeological contexts affects the historical story we tell. Two aspects of how we talk about human beings are especially important here.

In the preceding section, I used the word “Indians,” which is the term we often use to describe the indigenous people of North and South America. This is a racial term that has meaning mainly as a social construct and that especially has meaning as a social construct only in reference to other socially constructed racial groups. Whatever the salience of the concept of “Indians” in recent and modern history, Echohawk (2007) points out that it was a meaningless term before Europeans knew that there was a New World that had people in it and before those people knew there were Europeans. Prior to European colonization, the only social constructs that existed on the Great Plains were the divisions among local linguistic and sociopolitical groups; the concept of “Indians” as we talk about them today developed in the Western imagination in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The next section discusses how Plains archaeologists have tried to identify local social groups, but it is important to note that I have worked to write about communities and people. Indians appear only in the Chapter 10, which addresses the period of time in which that concept first appeared in the world.

However, while I write in terms of people, I largely avoid singling out men and women. The popular view of Plains people is spectacularly male-oriented. Some aspects of the archaeological record (rock art, for example), as well as ethnographic data on recent groups, indicate that male status was very important in many Plains societies. Human lives and the archaeology that those lives create, though, equally involve women. Many people have argued that male and female areas of life on the Plains were different but equally significant and that they changed over time (i.e., authors in Albers and Medicine [1983]). Most kinds of archaeological evidence, though, are notoriously difficult to read in terms of gender. Archaeologists know that men and women make (and made) pots and stone tools, that men and women butcher (and butchered) animals, and that social expectations about who should do (and should have done)

those kinds of things vary (and must have varied) in time and space. Gender roles differ from society to society and likely have done so for millennia. However, we have struggled to find rigorous ways of studying gender in most kinds of archaeological data. I avoid speculating about that topic here, although there is art and skeletal evidence from fairly recent periods of time that opens important windows into this topic. My focus is on groups of people as we can see them in archaeological contexts.

THINKING ABOUT HUMAN HISTORY ON THE GREAT PLAINS

This volume thus summarizes the history of millennia of change in the human occupation of the Plains as archaeology tells us about that history, from its earliest settlement by humans at the end of the Ice Age to the early parts of the 20th century. Lekson (2009) observes that regional archaeological overviews tend to do this by focusing either on narratives of events and processes in human history or on summaries of archaeological data. My goal here is to fall somewhere in the middle of this range of variation: I mean this to be a structured narrative of important long-term human processes on the Plains that also puts the archaeological record front and center, striving to tell both what we know and how we know it. However, telling history on the basis of archaeological or any other kind of evidence is not just a matter of describing a series of dates and changes in ways of life, artifacts, and so on. Telling history requires a coherent emphasis that makes particular dates and particular kinds of change important and that ties them together.

Lekson (2009) emphasized the development of political complexity in the American Southwest, something that is difficult to see on the Plains. Plains people certainly knew about complex societies, but they seem to have done a good job of avoiding becoming part of them until late in the Colonial period. Instead, my major emphasis here is on four intertwined sets of long-term developments. The first of these is a long, and for the most part slow, trend toward an increasingly intensive use of the Plains environment, particularly a long-term intensification of subsistence practices. The second is a parallel progressive increase over time in the degree to which Plains people interacted with people in other parts of North America. These two changes are, in turn, linked to two more: substantial increases over time in social violence – war – and the appearance of increasingly visible and distinctive social groups.

This differs from many syntheses on the Plains, which tend fairly strongly toward the data summary end of Lekson's range and often emphasize the conceptual units that archaeologists have used to make sense out of the sites and artifacts found on the Plains in different times and places (i.e., Hord and Banks 2006; Lehmer 1971; Peck 2011; Schlesier 1987; Wedel 1961; Wood 1998). These units summarize general patterns of variation in the archaeological record into the sequences of temporal change and regional difference

Thinking about Human History on the Great Plains

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that archaeologists refer to as “culture–history.” Because so much of the Plains literature relies on them, and because they lie at the heart of much of what we know about ancient people on the Plains, I cannot avoid culture–historical terminology completely. However, as noted above, I do not emphasize it here. The next section explains why.

Culture Historical Approaches on the Great Plains

The advance in North American archaeology finds the Great Plains area somewhat near the rear of the procession. Not that there has been a lack of work in the Plains, but, rather, the work has remained unorganized. Reports on research in this field show as interesting materials and other data as are to be encountered in any field, but some of these reports exhibit a lack of information regarding the activities of neighboring investigators that is anything but advantageous to the author. Also, older reports are at times so full of meaningless terms that they are hardly worth reading.

Strong’s *An Introduction to Nebraska Archaeology* serves to emphasize the need for better cooperation and organization among Great Plains students. We need a standardized system of culture nomenclature and classification.
 (Carder 1935, 152)

Albert Spaulding (a sometime Plains archaeologist; Schultz and Spaulding 1948; Spaulding 1956) defined “archaeology” at its most basic as “the study of the interrelationships of form, temporal locus, and spatial locus exhibited by artifacts” (1960: 438). This underscores the fundamental problem of archaeological analysis. Archaeologists see the lives of ancient people by studying temporal and spatial patterns in the things those people left behind; we need to find systematic ways to identify and organize those patterns in order to do this. The major conceptual tools that archaeologists used in this effort for much of the 20th century are ways of grouping sites or levels within sites on the basis of similarities in the archaeological materials they contain. Plains archaeologists responded to Carder’s call by relying with varying degrees of rigor on two approaches to doing this. The Plains archaeological literature draws terminology from both of these.

The older of these approaches is McKern’s (1939) Midwest Taxonomic System (MTS). McKern referred to sites or well–defined levels within sites as *components* and assessed their degree of homogeneity by considering the kinds of archaeological material (“traits”) in them. He referred to a recurring set of archaeological traits as a *trait complex*. The MTS groups components hierarchically, much like the approach in the Linnaean system of classifying biological species. In McKern’s system, a group of more or less indistinguishable components forms a *focus* (plural *foci*), with groups of similar foci combined into *aspects*, groups of aspects combined into *phases*, groups of phases combined into *patterns*, and groups of patterns combined at the highest level of abstraction into *bases*. In practice, more general units than the aspect have played minor roles in

archaeological practice on the Plains. Crucially, one of McKern's primary goals in developing the MTS was to begin to be able to identify ancient social groups on the basis of archaeological data. He specifically suggested that a focus "may in instances correspond closely to the local tribe in ethnology," although he warned that this is not certain (McKern 1939, 308).

Dissatisfied with McKern's approach, Willey and Phillips (1958) developed a simplified but similar classification. This approach groups *components* (in McKern's sense) into *phases*, which are essentially the same as McKern's foci. Willey and Phillips expressly saw phases as geographically and temporally limited and proposed the concept of a *horizon* to describe a limited set of traits (often just a style of decoration or an unusual artifact form) that is very widespread in space but does not persist for very long. Similarly, they defined the concept of a *tradition*, a roughly similar kind of pattern that is geographically limited but that endured over time. Like McKern, Willey and Phillips wanted phases to be socially meaningful but were aware that it was dangerous to assume this. Writing with hopeful hearts, they argued that "it looks as though the present chances are against archaeological phases having much, if any, social reality, but this does not prevent us from maintaining that they can have and that in the meantime we may act as if they did have" (Willey and Phillips 1958: 50).

Plains archaeology has defined units using both McKern's and Willey and Phillips's terminology and has often taken Willey and Phillips's suggestion that "we may act as if they did have" social reality to heart with a vengeance. Particularly for the last 2,000–3,000 years of indigenous history, it has often treated culture-historical units defined on the basis of archaeological data as having more or less direct social meaning (often quite explicitly; i.e., Peck 2011; Schlesier 1994). This emphasis in our literature, though, neglects Willey and Phillips's caution that "present chances are against" this necessarily being a good idea.

I avoid issues of culture-historical taxonomy here. For the most part, the distinctions archaeologists have drawn on the Plains reflect real differences in time and space in such traits as house form, ceramic technology, and projectile point style; many of them are fundamentally important to any discussion of human history in the region, including this one. However, there are a number of issues that make a major emphasis on them ill-suited to this volume. For one, this book is about people, not about phases or foci, and the amount of attention that we have sometimes devoted to classifying archaeological material can make it difficult to see ancient human beings. One important reason for this is that we do not always know the significance of the differences we recognize in the archaeological record, although we do know that this significance can vary. To take only one example, some ethnoarchaeological data document associations between particular projectile styles and some kinds of social groups in southern Africa (Weissner 1983; also see below), an issue

I return to later in this volume. However, we sometimes see essentially identical projectile points over areas that are too large to plausibly be the territory of a single social group. We also know that differences in point form reflect many factors – points used in war, for example, may be different than points used in hunting, even when they are made by the same people (Keeley 1996, 52) – and we can make similar observations about such traits as architecture and pottery (see Moore [2012] on similar issues in domestic architecture). McKern, Willey, and Phillips were right to urge caution in assuming that material differences as archaeologists define them necessarily map onto social differences (although I discuss how we can sometimes see social differences in archaeological settings below).

Archaeologists have also occasionally used different terms to describe similar, and sometimes identical, culture-historical constructs separated in space by little more than the boundaries of modern states and countries. Assumptions of homogeneity within culture-historical units can also obscure connections among them and variation within them and almost certainly impose boundaries on societies whose interrelationships often formed social continua (cf. Blakeslee 2002; Roper 2007). Furthermore, archaeologists have long recognized that we often have different implicit approaches to classifying the artifacts that we use to define phases and complexes. As Marie Wormington puts it,

Not all archaeologists create types in the same way, however. Some are “lumpers” who recognize only a few types and allow a great variation within each category. Others are “splitters” who recognize a large number of types and insist on greater uniformity because they believe that certain relatively small differences may be significant. Even though archaeologists try to avoid both extremes, they must, if they are honest, admit that they tend toward one end of the scale or the other. The tendencies of the writer are, admittedly, on the splitting side. (1957, 3)

In Wormington’s spirit, I note that my tendencies are on the lumping side. I find it difficult to assume, for example, that minor differences in the location of a notch on a spear or arrow point identify human societies. Like many archaeologists, I wonder about the extent to which stoneworkers’ levels of skill and the characteristics of the raw material available to them affect artisans’ ability to locate notches precisely; I doubt that notch locations do much to signal group membership given the near-invisibility of those locations on a point mounted in its shaft.

One implication of this is that constructs such as phases defined by splitters are often not quite comparable to those defined by lumpers, especially when we rely on fairly intuitive criteria for defining distinctions among the diagnostic artifacts that identify those constructs (e.g., types of points or pots). The chapters here thus refer to traditional culture-historical constructs as needed but tend not to use them as fundamental organizing units for discussion. Instead, I organize this volume by time. I do this because my goal here is to

write an archaeological history of the Plains and to show that we can see strong patterns of long-term change in the ways people have lived there. History unfolds over time, and differences and similarities among people at moments in time help us to see how it unfolds. Focusing on the constructs that archaeologists use to organize our data rather than the patterns we can see in ancient lives distracts us from this goal.

A Note on Objects and Social Identities

Cultural-historical units such as phases and foci thus have uncertain and incompletely understood links to ancient human social groups. However, the logic behind them has merit; distinctive groups of modern people often use distinctive kinds of material culture (clothing, architecture, tools), and we can surely infer that ancient people often did the same. The problem is not that geographic patterns in material culture do not have social meaning. It is that we do not always know what patterns to look for or what kinds of meanings those patterns have and that we do know that similar objects can take on different social meanings in different settings. Bushman arrow points in the Kalahari Desert map on to language groups, but spear points among the Maasai of Kenya vary among groups that Maasai men join as they reach different ages (Larick 1985).

Archaeologists have grappled with these problems and continue to grapple with them (the details of this debate vary over time, but Hegmon [1992] outlines the fundamental issues it involves). For the purposes of this book, the essential issue has to do with what most archaeologists refer to as “style.” At its heart, this notion has to do with choices that people make about how to do something, recognizing that there can be multiple equally effective ways of accomplishing a task and that we can do some things in ways that are simply irrelevant to the utilitarian purpose of an object (e.g., we can paint or incise many designs on a pot without affecting its practical utility). The ways we choose from among these kinds of possibilities can be quite deliberate (e.g., as in the designs of flags), or they can be close to unconscious, the result of simply doing things the way we learned to do them. For example, Japanese woodworkers use saws that cut on the pull stroke, but American woodworkers use pull saws almost exclusively to make very precise cuts in fine cabinetry and furniture manufacture and use push saws for other work (Bleed and Bleed 1987).

Some concept of social interaction underlies all of this. We learn how to decorate flags and cut wood as members of social groups, and that means that we should be able to see some kind of social meaning in the kinds of material characteristics that we perceive as stylistic. But “interaction” is a vague concept and humans interact in many different ways. We also live in social groups with varying degrees of formal structure and in the past have often lived in groups